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ABSTRACT

In winter 1982-83, a survey of California's community colleges was conducted to determine which assessment activities were considered most effective and to identify areas needing improvement. Responses were received from 99 of the 106 colleges in the system. Study findings included the following: (1) assessment procedures, counseling procedures, placement procedures, and research were felt to represent the best aspects of college entrance programs; (2) the quality of service to students, interaction between students and staff, and professional interaction were also highlighted as program strengths; (3) when asked to identify the most needed changes in assessment practices at their own colleges, the majority of the respondents focused on areas related to technical needs, expansion needs, the need for increased control over assessment and placement, and questions of testing philosophy; (4) respondents tended to have reservations about the testing instruments used and the lack of organized research to validate their programs; and (5) respondents recognized the need to evaluate cut-off scores used, to conduct follow-up and retention studies, and to analyze services to high-risk students. The study report includes sample respondent comments. (LAL)

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ASSESSMENT PROCEDURES:
What Works and What Needs Improvement in California Community Colleges?

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With increasing professional and public interest in student competencies, a major change is taking place in the procedures of assessment and placement at community colleges. One of the results of the student unrest in the late '60s and early '70s was a sharp reduction in college testing, orientation, and even counseling activities as students demanded the right to make their own decisions. With the continued decline of SAT and ACT scores, however, it has become increasingly clear that student preparation for college work is often less than adequate and, furthermore, that ill-prepared and ill-informed students often make poor academic choices and stumble badly as a result of these choices.

Within the past several years, some statewide community college systems have begun to mandate a structured entrance program, even for the "open door" colleges. This program generally includes assessment, orientation, and guidance. New Jersey began such a program in 1978 and Florida in 1979 (Rounds, 1983). Professionals in California, concerned about lack of assessment and guidance for students in the nation's largest community college system, formed LARC (Learning, Assessment, and Retention Consortium) in 1981. In 1984 the state legislature passed a 10 million dollar

matriculation bill which was, however, vetoed by the cost-cutting governor.. The bill is expected to be brought back in 1985, and it is generally assumed that intensified matriculation procedures will before long be mandated by the California Community College Chancellor's Office.

As a result of this activity, colleges in California are looking closely at their current procedures, to determine what is effective and what changes need to be made. In the winter of 1982-83, 99 colleges of the 106-college system (93.4%) responded to a survey of assessment activities which asked what they felt was most effective and what most needed improvement. The following article presents a summary of the data that were gathered, as well as representative comments in each area.

Seventy-four of the 99 colleges (74.7%) responded to the question which specifically asked for the best aspects of college entrance programs. For the purpose of analyzing the data, however, the five that answered only "NA" or "Too new" will be grouped among the non-respondents; 69 responses will be used to calculate percentages.

The majority of the responses can be grouped roughly into four major categories: assessment procedures, counseling procedures, placement procedures, and research. As elements of responses from some colleges fall into more than one category, the total number of responses, 99, exceeds the 69 colleges being counted.

The total number of responses relating to assessment procedures numbered 50, or 50.5 percent of all comments; to placement procedures, 25 (25.3 percent); to counseling procedures, 15 (15.2 percent); and to research, 7 (7.1 percent). An additional two comments are listed with miscellaneous.

The 50 assessment procedures responses may be further divided into five responses relating to *orientation* and six relating to *instruments*, 14 to *speed and timeliness*, and 25 to the *comprehensive nature of the program*. The 25 placement responses may be divided into *placement for specific subjects*, with 11 relating to language arts only and 6 to language arts and math. Eight make general observations about placement. Counseling procedures have not been subdivided but tend to deal primarily with specific procedures or with interpersonal relationships. Research has not been subdivided. Table 1 provides an overview of absolute numbers and percentages of responses in each category.

Assessment Procedures

The five comments dealing with *orientation sessions* primarily made note of their existence as an effective part of the general entrance procedure. Comments on *instruments* focused on their reliability or appropriateness.

One dealt with the fact that the tests used were power tests instead of timed tests, and only one mentioned a specific effective instrument: the Comparative Guidance and Placement battery.

Rapid turn-around of testing results was the focus of responses relating to *speed or timeliness*. Typical of responses in this category were the following:

1. Frequent testing, with individual interpretations of scores for students.

2. Speed and accessibility of results [within 20 minutes].

3. Good immediate feedback.

Two other comments dealt with frequency of testing, one with length of testing time, and one with the efficiency of moving to a group approach for feedback.

Twenty-four colleges responded about the overall quality of their programs. Sample comments relating to the *comprehensiveness* included the following:

1. Assessment, counseling, interpretation, and course selection all brought together during registration.

2. Virtually all are tested, and each receives a printout listing reading level, English courses to be taken, math areas of strength.

3. Counselor involvement and curriculum planning [are the best] because program was developed by both the Office of Instruction and Student Services.

Placement Procedures

Of the 25 responses relating to effective placement procedures, only 8 replies did not specifically mention some aspect of language arts placement, and even in these 8, English placement may be inferred as part of the focus of the response. Only 6 responses specifically named mathematics placement, always in conjunction with language arts; however, mathematics placement may be implied in at least some of the 8 more general responses.

Comments dealing only with effective language arts placement included the following "best" practices:

1. In-class English placement, because of objective tests and writing sample and guaranteed access to class level determined by placement.

2. English placement because experience has shown accuracy of recommendations; increased retention.

3. English placement [because] the faculty run the process and are committed to it.

Examples of comments mentioning both mathematics and language arts placement included the following as best elements:

1. English/Math placement because students are less "set up" to fail in their course work.

2. Comprehensive nature of English, math assessment aids students in making wise course decisions.

3. The package of Reading, Writing, and Math gives composite picture of student's level of achievement.

Comments dealing more generally with placement included as best elements:

1. Requiring specific reading/writing levels for transfer level courses.

2. Extensive prerequisite system supported by faculty.

3. Academic departments are pleased with placement, student achievement is maximized, and drops and adds are cut down.

Counseling Procedures

The 15 responses relating to counseling practices tended to deal with specific procedures or with interpersonal relationships, either with the students or with other staff. Examples of positive practices included:

1. Use of student information sheet for follow-up.

2. Use of results for advisement with decision left to student.

3. The personal touch provided by staff produces the best results under standardized conditions.

Research

Although research was a major area mentioned when lauding other colleges, only seven colleges pointed with pride to their own research. Two commented positively

on placing students on the basis of probability statements, one observing that such statements for advising are "understandable and defensible." Two others said they were beginning to develop a body of research, one commenting that empirical data was "the only defensible basis for such a program."

The three other respondents indicated they had already accumulated considerable data; one mentioned data extending back fifteen years, and the other tied in the college's research to its curriculum, saying: "The program is based on substantial experimental research, and the curriculum has been evaluated to demonstrate increased student retention, GPA, and skills growth."

Areas Most in Need of Examination: Self-Assessment

The other research question explored changes in assessment as perceived most needed in the colleges' own programs. Seventy-nine colleges (79.8%) responded to this question; however, eliminating the four responses that were marked "NA" or "None," leaves a total of 75 responses to be counted. Five of the 20 colleges not responding specifically indicated they had no programs and two that their programs were too new to evaluate.

The responses of the 75 colleges can be broadly categorized as fitting under technical needs, expansion needs, the need for increased control over assessment and

placement, and questions of testing philosophy. There is also a small miscellaneous grouping. Since elements of some responses fit into more one category, the total number of responses, 107, exceeds 75. (See Table 2).

Forty-seven comments (43.9 percent of all comments) fit under the technical needs category and can be further divided into 24 responses relating to *research* needs, 16 responses to concerns about *instruments*, and 7 to comments about *computers*. The 29 responses (27.1 percent) grouped under expansion needs involve *personnel, space, or programs.* Of the 17 comments (15.9 percent) about placement into various disciplines, 6 refer both to language arts and mathematics placement, 1 comments on mathematics and chemistry placement, and 3 deal exclusively with mathematics placement. An additional seven references deal with language arts placement alone, three of which express concerns about English as a Second Language programs (ESL).

A number of colleges expressed a concern about the need for further analysis and clarification of their own testing philosophies; 8 responses (7.6 percent) fell into this category. An additional 6 comments (5.6 percent) could be categorized simply as miscellaneous. Table 2 provides information about numbers and percentages responding.

Technical Needs

Research Needs

Of the various needs of a technical nature, the largest group of responses, 24, can be categorized under Research Needs. Of these, 8 related to a search for more appropriate cut-off scores for advising purposes. Sample comments included the following needs for

1. Research[ing] local norms.
2. Establishing scores that correlate with success in courses, [doing] longitudinal research.
3. Cut-off scores . . . because scores were established arbitrarily.

Other colleges observed the need for general student follow-up and longitudinal research (four comments); three spoke to their greatest need as being increased information about retention; and two mentioned further work on curriculum. The other concerns were varied, as is indicated by these examples:

1. [Need] identification of high-risk students.
2. [Need to study] diagnostic aspects of the tests in terms of lower levels; not enough details to assist most underprepared students; not enough item analysis.
3. Need information-sharing.

Assessment Instruments

Fourteen responses dealt with the need for improved assessment instruments. Four questioned the value of

specific instruments:

1. Problems using Nelson-Denny as a placement tool, because it was not designed as a placement tool.

2. Growing dissatisfaction with Davis and Coop for proper placement of students.

3. SCAT and Coop English are old tests. We need shorter, easily-scored test that has a high predictive validity with our transfer-level courses.

The remaining ten comments dealt with similar concerns about testing instruments in general. For example:

1. Question of reliability and validity of current instruments used.

2. Would like to see writing and math proficiency tests; [have] question of validation.

3. Testing instruments need to be reevaluated and constantly upgraded.

Computers

Of the ten responses that dealt with the need to utilize the computer better, one concern was for "computerizing the system," and three were primarily concerned with interfacing testing and scoring with the computer, either in regards to doing the actual scoring or getting the scores into the computer for easy availability. Two were interested in using the computer for checking prerequisites, and another college--already using

the computer and a prescriptive student printout--wanted to evaluate the language on the printout.

Expansion

Twenty-nine responses focused on the need for expansion: eight commented on the need for more space to centralize, and three specifically mentioned the need for additional staff. Ten commented on the need to expand the testing itself:

1. Need for general assessment prior to enrollment because students are not prepared for courses.

2. Comprehensive assessment . . . is needed but very complicated.

3. We are working on expansion of the college's assessment program.

Two referred to total district involvement in examining the process.

In addition to other observations relating to such items as expanded scheduling of classes and orientations, an additional five responses indicated the more critical need was for sweeping change:

1. Complete review necessary.

2. All phases, because not in place to date.

3. [Assessment] not required, not enforced.

4. Everything.

5. Too numerous to mention, because I would only become more frustrated.

Assessment and
Placement Needs

The third category of major needs dealt with various problems in testing and placing students in specific subjects. Seventeen responses fell into this category, seven of which focused only on language arts needs, three only on mathematics, and seven on multiple subjects. Comments in relation to English were concerned primarily with reading assessment and the need for improved ESL assessment. Sample reading comments were:

1. [Problem] allowing students to enroll in courses requiring basic reading/writing skills but not requiring test scores at certain levels, because students are committing academic suicide.

2. [We are in the] process of re-examining impact of reading ability across the curriculum and how reading ability should impact on placement recommendations and requirements.

Two of the comments about ESL placement were the following:

1. [Need] assessment of ESL students, because of increasing numbers . . . who cannot speak or write English.

2. English [programs] for non-native speakers growing too fast to be effective.

The three comments that were exclusively concerned with mathematics placement included one which indicated the need to expand above basic level assessment,

as "currently we only examine basic math, not algebra or above." Seven additional comments spoke to a combination of placement problems, expressing concerns for such things as:

1. Math and chemistry testing, because it has apparently strongly affected our enrollment patterns.

2. Overly heavy emphasis on English to detriment of reading and math.

3. Better control over English and math classes.

Testing Philosophy

Among those responding to the question about whatever most needed re-examining, eight colleges commented on the basic need to determine the college philosophy of assessment and placement. These responses indicated a wide range along the continuum of points of view. Among the group that had apparently already accepted the concept of testing, one college observed that its English placement tests "seems to show we value such skills," and another assumed testing was of value but complained, "Too much information is kept from the students about the significance , details of the test results." A third indicated: "We have a very active committee reviewing the whole issue of testing and placement--a reflection of our dissatisfaction with the current process."

Another four colleges indicated they were simply questioning whom to test, and how, whether testing should mandatory, and how to handle "drop-in" students.

Three other colleges expressed considerable concern about the potentially negative impact of testing, even while indicating they would be re-examining their own positions:

1. There is concern that general assessment would lead to elimination of students at lower skill levels, and we do not want that to happen.

2. We do not believe in mandatory testing or placement. It is time, however, for us to review our ideas to determine if there are better ways to serve our students.

3. We have been adamantly opposed to placement testing and the abuses that grow out of categorizing adults. We need to consider if we need such a program as placement/assessment because of legislative mandates.

Conclusions

Community college respondents, when looking at their own programs, find much to be proud of, often identifying the quality of service to the students and the interaction between staff and students and among the professionals themselves. On the other hand, they tend to have reservations about the instruments they have been using and the lack of any organized research to validate the effects of what they have been doing. They recognize the need to evaluate cut-off scores used, to do follow-up and retention studies, and to analyze services especially to high-risk students, as well as to

increase information exchange among the various colleges. A few continue to challenge the value of testing itself.

The concerns expressed by the colleges were taken into consideration when the Chancellor's Office of the California Community Colleges developed the Matriculation Model that was passed by the state legislature in the fall of 1984. This model mandated that participating colleges require assessment, orientation, counseling, follow-up for high-risk students, and research. Approximately 50 colleges competed for the funding that the bill made available, and interest in the pilot project was high throughout the state. The Governor's veto in September, because of his budget concerns, was a major disappointment; however, it may safely be assumed that another version of the bill will eventually be approved, and most colleges are in the process of developing much more structured admissions procedures. The next few years will see a dramatic turn-around as these "open door" institutions take a closer look at entering students.

REFERENCE

Rounds, Jeanine C. "Admissions, Placement, and Competency: Assessment Practices in California Community Colleges, 1982-83." Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Brigham Young University, 1983.

Table 1

Most Admired Assessment/Placement Practices of California Community Colleges: Self-Evaluation, By Numbers and Percent, 1982-1983

Area of Commendation	Total	Sub-Total	% of Colleges Responding (69)	% of Total Responses (99*)
Assessment Procedures	50		72.5	50.5
Orientation		5	7.2	
Instruments		6	8.7	
Speed		14	20.3	
Comprehensiveness		25	36.2	
Placement Procedures	25		25.3	25.3
Language Arts		11	15.9	
Math and Language Arts		6	8.7	
General		8	11.0	
Counseling Procedures	15		21.7	15.2
Research	7		10.1	7.1
Miscellaneous	2			2.0

N = 69

*This total exceeds total N because some responses were divided into more than one category.

Table 2

Areas of Concern in Assessment/Placement Practices of California Community Colleges: Self-Evaluation, By Number and Percent, 1982-1983

Areas of Concern	Total	Sub-Total	% of Colleges Responding (75)	% of Total Responses (107*)
Technical Needs	47		62.7	43.9
Research		24	32.0	
Assessment Instruments		16	21.3	
Computers		7	9.3	
Expansion	29		38.7	27.1
Placement	17		25.7	15.9
Language Arts Only		7	9.3	
Mathematics Only		3	4.0	
Combination		7	9.3	
Philosophy	8		10.7	7.5
Miscellaneous	6		8.0	5.6

N = 75

*This total exceeds N because some responses were divided into more than one category.

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